

INNIS HERALD

MONTHLY FIELD REPORT. VOLUME XLIII., NO. III., NOVEMBER 2007.



EVENIENCY RIVIATION NEPHELIADS GELICIDE



THE INNIS HERALD

WWW.INNISHERALD.COM

Innis College ☞ 2 Sussex Ave. ☞ Room 107 ☞ Toronto, Ontario ☞ M5S 1J5 ☞ innis.herald@utoronto.ca ☞ 416-978-4748



MASTHEAD



<i>Editors-in-Chief</i>	Chris Heron & Christine Creighton
<i>Associate Editors</i>	Marc Saint-Cyr & Caitlin Woods
<i>Film Editor</i>	Tom Latkowski
<i>External Officer</i>	Michelle Kloepper
<i>Treasurer</i>	Katherine Janicki
<i>Media Representative</i>	Rolla Tahir
<i>Webmaster</i>	Jadie Lo
<i>Layout Editor</i>	Chris Heron



PRÉCIS



& « *Like most obtuse, jargon-riddled 'scholarship,' it is destined to be a library-only affair* » (p. 2-3).

& « *The plot is easily revealed and will tell you nothing about the meaning of this narrative* » (p. 3).

& « *The film is on film* » (p. 3).

& « *He revealed that, contrary to the popular belief, all Negro singers start singing in Gospel Church choirs* » (p. 4).

& « *An ideology emblazoned on t-shirts of Led Zeppelin fans and banded down* » (p. 6).

& « *When the Boys emerged on their flying boogie-boards in their ultra-tight, telltale-squeezing space suits, the crowd was deafening* » (p. 7).

& « *I'm not going to refuse them candy or quote Zapata at them* » (p. 8).

& « *By 1968, he was off the rails completely, making slews of almost incomprehensible film experiments* » (p. 9-11).



NOTES



Artwork featured on the cover and page 11 courtesy of Andrea Creighton.

Artwork featured on page 3 courtesy of Branko Vranic.

The three photographs on page 8 are from Josie Wornoff.

The polyptych on page four is a work by Dan Epstein entitled Framed.

On November 8th we observed the 55th anniversary of Harold Innis's death.

We are now comfortably located in our new office, room 107, just past the Innis Café. Our office hours are located on our website.

We are currently accepting submissions for an upcoming issue dedicated entirely to lists. Lists may be of any length, bulleted or numbered, sincere or ironic and their list component may be completely arbitrary.

The Innis Herald is published during the second full week of each month during the Fall and Winter terms. Meeting dates and deadlines can be found on our website.

All submissions are welcome.



Giving Bullshit a Bad Name

A few years before his death, George Orwell decried the bloated vanity of the average modern writer, who seemed to be « almost indifferent as to whether his words mean anything or not ». Writers, Orwell argued, had become addicted to « pretentious diction », designed to give banal statements « an appearance of profundity ». Modern writing, he contended, now consisted « in gumming together long strips of words which have already been set in order by someone else, and then making the results presentable by sheer humbug ». He hoped, however, that efforts by cleverer authors could « make pretentiousness unfashionable. » Sixty years later I found myself reading this critically-acclaimed passage by the influential French philosopher Felix Guattari:

We can clearly see that there is no bi-univocal correspondence between linear signifying links or archi-writing, depending on the author, and this multi-referential, multi-dimensional machinic catalysis. The symmetry of scale, the transversality, the pathic non-discursive character of their expansion: all these dimensions remove us from the logic of the excluded middle and reinforce us in our dismissal of the ontological binarism we criticised previously.

To the post-modern scholars who now dominate academia, this is evidently profound stuff. To me, however, it is a meaningless cascade of pseudo-intellectual jargon, made all the more hilarious by its preface of « we can clearly see ». The only thing I can « clearly see » is that efforts to end pretentious diction have been decisively defeated: pretentiousness is now quite fashionable indeed.

As an exercise, I've quoted two passages below. One is by a U of T professor whose doctoral dissertation is currently under consideration for publication by a major Canadian publishing company. The other is from a phoney essay randomly generated by a joke website, elsewhere.org. Can you identify which is the U of T professor and which is the joke?

Passage 1:
« Sexual identity is fundamentally a legal fiction », says Foucault; however, according to Deleuze, it is not so much

sexual identity that is fundamentally a legal fiction, but rather the genre, and some would say the futility, of sexual identity. Yet Foucault promotes the use of capitalist theory to challenge the status quo. The subject is interpolated into a neotextual sublimation that includes sexuality as a paradox.

Passage 2:
Encouraging interference, experiential multidimensionality and conflicting viewpoints helps undermine monolithic political structures. The lurch and the jump of a browser's deterritorialized journey through a hyperlinked text simultaneously problematizes connectivity, perspective and the nature of multidimensional space even as it explores them. It calls for a pedagogy that incorporates the fractal into its modus operandi.

Kudos to those of you who guessed that the first passage is from elsewhere.org, while the second is by Professor Carolyn Guertin, Senior McLuhan Fellow in the McLuhan Program of Culture and Technology at U of T. Look for Professor Guertin's doctoral dissertation, hilariously titled *Quantum Feminist Mnemotechnics: The Archival Text, Digital Narratives and the Limits of Memory*, in bookstores nowhere (like most obscure, jargon-riddled 'scholarship', it is destined to be a library-only affair). Guertin analyses what she calls « quantum feminism », or even more humorously, « cyberfeminism », and what I call utter nonsense. The professor evidently believes that advancing technology offers an opportunity to throw off « white western male power structures », but I'm not quite sure how. I put myself through the torture of reading a few chapters and wasn't able to make much sense of it. Here is a typical passage:

Cyberfeminist embodiment, as a « database of intensities », is an exploration of the senses and of hybridity (as opposed to simple dualisms or binary oppositions) in the suspended present moment, which engenders a new awareness of the body—not a loss of body boundaries as Donna Haraway's « Cyborg Manifesto » advocates. This is hybridized embodiment where the subject exists in a state of intensity only possible when she is in the

driver's seat and connected to history, to memory, to community. Coherence happens at the metatextual and quantum level where the body becomes text and the organizing principles are always particular and paradigmatic.

After a few hours of reading this, I began to think that shoving bamboo shoots under my fingernails might not be so bad after all. She even describes her ideas as « posthuman », cyberfeminists having, apparently, ascended to a higher plane of existence. I'm not the only one who thinks this sort of writing is the « hybridized embodiment » of intellectual vanity and literary incompetence, where the subject exists in a state of intensity only possible when she uses obtuse language in a failed attempt to make mediocre ideas seem profound. In a recent article, the bestselling author Richard Dawkins expressed his surprise that U of T, « a normally respectable university », would hire a « second-rate fake » like Guertin, deriding *Quantum Feminist Mnemotechnics* as « pretentious and meaningless garbage ».

If you couldn't tell the real passage from the fake one, take heart; neither, apparently, could the prestigious academic journal *Social Text*. In 1996, the physicist Alan Sokal authored and successfully published a phoney post-modern article in the American journal. In his article, Sokal denounced the laws of physics as « dogma imposed by the long post-Enlightenment hegemony over the Western intellectual outlook », and asserted that reality itself was nothing more than a construct designed to privilege the white-male elite:

Physical « reality » [Sokal wrote], no less than social « reality », is at bottom a social and linguistic construct, scientific « knowledge », far from being objective, reflects and encodes the dominant ideologies and power relations of the culture that produced it; the truth claims of science are inherently theory-laden and self-referential; and consequently, the discourse of the scientific community, for all its undeniable value, cannot assert a privileged epistemological status with respect to counter-hegemonic narratives emanating

from dissident or marginalized communities.

« Basically, Sokal later explained, I claim that quantum gravity – the still-speculative theory of space and time on scales of a millionth of a billionth of a billionth of a billionth of a centimeter – has profound political implications (which, of course, are 'progressive') ». Sokal called upon the education system to completely discard mathematics, which is hopelessly « contaminated » by patriarchy, capitalism, and militarism, and await the construction of a new, « emancipatory mathematics », which alone can lead to the creation of a truly « liberatory science ». This « emancipatory mathematics, must, Sokal asserted with mock seriousness, become a concrete tool of progressive political praxis ». *Social Text* swallowed all this, hook, line, and sinker. Sokal could only express his incredulity « at how readily they accepted my implication that the search for truth in science must be subordinated to a political agenda, and how oblivious they were to the article's overall illogic ». So long as the article spoke their language and flattered their egos, the editors of *Social Text* were blind to its inherent idiocy. Sokal's hoax exposed post-modern « scholarship » as, in Noam Chomsky's phrase, a « masturbation fantasy in which the world of fact hardly matters ».

The post-modernists' defense of their writing style is even more preposterous than Sokal's fake argument. In 1998, the journal *Philosophy and Literature* bestowed its annual Bad Writing Award on the feminist philosopher Judith Butler – a richly deserved prize if there ever was one. Butler promptly dashed off a response to *The New York Times*, in which she insisted that complex ideas demand complex prose, citing the German philosopher Theodor Adorno: « only, she quoted Adorno, what they [the public] do not need first to understand, they consider understandable; only the word coined by commerce, and really alienated, touches them as familiar ». Expanding on this argument, Adorno condemned « lucidity, objectivity, and concise precision » as « ideologies » invented by the capitalist oligarchy to entrench its hegemony. When the common man feels that something is well-written, therefore, he is actually just experiencing an engrained response instilled by capitalist indoctrination, all expressly designed to reinforce some over-mighty, all-powerful elite. Adorno was determined not to



support this nebulous but evidently fiendish overlord, and so made his prose as unreadable as possible. The postmodernists have all followed him like lemmings – obtuse, jargon-spewing lemmings. Can anyone really believe, however, that the great readable writers of literature – from Emily Dickinson and John Keats to Franz Kafka and Oscar Wilde – were all the products of some sinister capitalist conspiracy? The argument is so pitifully stupid that I almost feel guilty making fun of it. As to whether complex ideas demand complex prose, the exact opposite is true. Complex ideas require simple prose so that they can be understood; it is only mediocre ideas that require complex prose, to ensure that they won't be understood and their mediocrity won't be exposed.

For all of their self-admiring disdain for the public – a peculiar quality to combine with support for « *marginalized communities* » – post-modernists do sometimes feel embarrassment at their excesses. Even Michel Foucault, whose works inspire an almost biblical reverence among post-modernists, famously lamented that fellow-philosopher Jacques Derrida « *gives bullshit a bad name* ». Foucault, evidently, wanted bullshit to have a good name, which indeed it does: post-modernism. ■

JOHN MARCHER

Into the Wild

« *WHILE it is still there... get out there and mess around with your friends, ramble out yonder and explore the forests, encounter the grizz, climb the mountains. Enjoy yourselves, keep your brain in your head and your head firmly attached to your body, the body active and alive, and I promise you this much: I promise you this one sweet victory over our enemies, over those deskbound people with their hearts in a safe deposit box and their eyes hypnotized by desk calculators. I promise you this: you will outlive the bastards* ». – Ed Abbey

The above quote was found on a website where Chris McCandless, a.k.a. Alexander Supertramp, the subject of Sean Penn's stunning new roovie, is discussed. The quote reveals much about the enduring appeal of this story – one which I think has

a lot of value no matter where your sympathies lie, what your world view is, or whether you are brought to tears by this story or, instead, snort in disgust (many Alaskans reportedly do the latter – an attitude I hope they possess for Anne Heche-based TV projects, as well).

The plot is easily revealed and will tell you nothing about the meaning of this narrative. Learn as little as you can about the story, forget *All the King's Men* and take an adventure. The quest for adventure, meaning, identity and purpose is the kind of true cliché that we all know is as deeply precious as our breath, and yet the means available to us for « *spiritual journey* » is almost non-existent in our cynical, Google Earth world.

Director Sean Penn approaches the story with innocence and fresh-

ness that allow the audience to take a risk-free journey across new landscapes – the natural world hidden from « *the desk-bound people* ». Penn, who has to be at least as jaded as you or I, has moved completely away from his well established political point-of-view and gone somewhere truly universal: inside a deeply human story layered with timeless themes while remaining completely modern and American. This Supertramp was probably academically brilliant, financially privileged, and full of college theory rather than real experience. He was brave and foolish. He hurt his family irrevocably, but listened to himself in an admirable way. He travelled like a hobo: on trains, on foot, or caravanned with late 20th century hippies. He could seem like a poseur, lining up at an

L.A. homeless shelter while he could go home anytime, or an enviable creative genius in a plot point concerning the Hoover Dam. His life ended in fulfillment of a dream: reaching Alaska and fully experiencing nature and solitude, and yet he died trapped, figuratively and literally within a vessel that symbolizes the mundane, the anonymous journeys of modern life (and all its rubbish).

Into the Wild's rare achievement is that it shows, instead of tells, its story, with a delicacy that leaves room for us to make of it what we will, to look inside at what we need to live, to think and feel, perhaps the highest achievement of the medium.

JACQUELINE
HOWELL

Bring Your Boogie Shoes

FAMILIES are a funny little thing. For some, family is parents and siblings; for others, it's a collection of friends. For Eddie Adams, it's his colleagues, a diverse group of compassionate human beings that have been pushed away by their loved ones. They've banded together in an effort to recreate what they've lost, to replace the sons, daughters, mothers and fathers that have shunned them. They cling to each other, because all their efforts

to go elsewhere have left them high and dry.

Boogie Nights takes us through the disco and bell bottoms of the 1970s to the power ballads and cocaine of the 1980s, from Eddie Adams to Dirk Diggler, with all the parties, Jacuzzi, Spanish Pantalones, Raphaels, blow jobs, broken beer bottles, cowboy suits, hi-fi stereos, limes and coke deals gone awry that director/writer Paul Thomas Anderson (*Punch Drunk Love*) can

jam into this masterpiece of American pop culture. He brings along all his friends, from the always brilliant Philip Seymour Hoffman (*Mission Impossible: III*), to the « *sexiest bitch in the whole world* », Julianne Moore (*Children of Men*), in addition to the talents of Don Cheadle (*Talk to Me*) and that « *big, bright shining star* », Mark Wahlberg (*Shooter*). Paul Thomas Anderson's encyclopedic knowledge of film technique and his flawless screenplay keep the camera

moving and the scenes poignant, providing the greatest epic about the pornography industry that will ever grace the silver screen. And it will be business as usual at Innis Town Hall on December 7th: the seats are free to sit in, and the film is on film. Come see it on Friday and you can still « *go out and get some of that Saturday night heaven* ».

PARKER LARAMIE



As I Was Entertained

I was fortunate to be wined and dined at the Castle George and to be entertained by Mr. Valentine (Val) Pringle, recently billed as Harry Belafonte's protégé. Again, I find it most difficult to convey my enthusiasm for this man. After listening to one of his songs, it is impossible to deny that he has a fantastically moving voice. He BREATHES rhythm. And may God help you if he laughs because when he laughs he just laughs all over and you can't help but love him. Consequently, after hearing about six of his songs, I pondered the possibility of interviewing him.

The interview, which I found to be easily arranged, proved most interesting, informing, and quite the contrary to what I had expected. I had imagined a short, clipped, rather impersonal talk with a performer obviously bored by a « green » reporter. Needless to say, I was most pleasantly

surprised. Mr Pringle was kind and patient enough to join our table of three for an afterdinner drink. He is not only very friendly and easy to talk to but also witty and intelligent. We discussed Mr. Pringle's career with him and discovered that he has been singing for three years. He revealed that, contrary to the popular belief, all Negro singers start singing in Gospel Church choirs. He never sang in one, but rather, while in church, could only think of one thing—getting « the hell out of there ». In three years of singing he has produced five albums, two of which (R.C.A. Victor label) are probably available in Canada. Our guest also voiced his intention to record more album of a somewhat varied nature. He would like to record spirituals, folk songs, blues, gospel tunes, and just about anything else that takes his fancy. This perhaps indicates his versatility and his appreciation of music

in general. Our discuss, lasting a full hour, varied from his career, to the recording, « *The Eve of Destruction* », to professional football, and finally terminated in a lengthy debate concerning idealism.

At this point, Mr. Pringle returned to his singing for another twenty or twenty-five minutes. He included a request, from our table, for « *Shenandoah* ». This was beautifully performed, both by Mr. Pringle and by his friend who accompanies him, most skillfully, on the guitar. Knowing relatively few technical terms in the field of music, I am unable to discuss, at length, the tone, the quality, or the varied effects of his singing. I only know that he had the rhythm and the song and the emotion and he instilled all three in the people around him.

In conclusion, I should like to make two recommendations. First, save every penny you have (after the

McGill Weekend, that is) and when you can afford to dine with class, so to speak, I suggest the « *Castle George* ». It is most enjoyable. Secondly, if you appreciate a bass baritone; if you like rhythm and if you want to be impressed, see Val Pringle when the opportunity next arises. Though lacking the showmanship or professionalism of Belafonte, he has a certain earthiness and a whole lot of friendliness which showmanship and professionalism prevent Belafonte from exhibiting. I realize, of course, that as a top performer, Belafonte must maintain a certain distance which, in effect, contributes to his showmanship but he has lost that personal touch which Mr. Pringle has so easily grasped. I only hope you can be entertained as I was entertained. ■

JOANNE KRESS





The Record Keeps Spinning

THE heightened visibility of disco in hip music scenes (however spurious a classification that may be) is a curious development. Not due to any disrepute connoted by the term, but that it has taken this long in the first place. Somehow, the Disco Sucks™ side of the coin, or at least its pejoration of the term disco, seems to have survived just as ably as the influence of the genre has. For one effigy courtesy of football fans, or an ideology emblazoned on t-shirts of Led Zeppelin listeners and handed down, we also have electronically-based dance music, hip-hop, the 12" single, the remix and the concept of the DJ as an artist, just to name a few aspects of, or surrounding, disco that have become integral to music today.

Certainly these factors have come to the fore of what is otherwise popular with this loose audience. A wide range of (seemingly contradictory) generic interests, including techno and hip-hop, has become paramount for credibility, and where is this best represented? Club nights, where named DJs spin increasingly eclectic sets, peppered with the latest remixes and mash-ups tailor made digitally for the latest minute (post-ipo, no vinyl required). The environment has changed very little over the years. Furthermore, post-punk/new wave paid considerable debts to disco (« *Death Disco* », anyone?), and when these tendencies were the rage at the turn of the millennium, the best analysis that could be mustered by finger-to-the-pulse outlets like Pitchforkmedia was the embarrassing misnomer « *dance-punk* »: so close, and yet so far.

Fittingly, the growing warmth to the veritably all-encompassing term disco may be found with names such as James Murphy (LCD Soundsystem, a founder of the DFA label) or Diplo (Hollertronix, M.I.A. producer), whose relationships with some of the most fashionable names of late make their propensity to include disco (often Italo) tracks in their DJ sets an accessible entry point for the genre's hipster acceptance. If DFA's work with the « *dance-punk* » group The Rapture was an important early gesture towards the genre, despite the ancestry of their material (their outright references, their « *career opportunities* ») going unnoticed, the influence of disco is now at the forefront.

The UK's Kathy Diamond's debut album had healthy blog coverage in the last year, the highlight of which, « *All Woman* », is an practically an elaboration on Inner Life's « *I've Got to Find Somebody* ». Meanwhile, Shally Shapiro's *Disco Romance* and groups Simian Mobile Disco and Black Devil Disco

Club are explicitly referencing their genealogy in their very names. Although somewhat more ambiguously referring to the genre in their name, specifically Italo, the Italians Do It Better imprint has been garnering increased attention.

Created by Troubleman Unlimited founder Mike Simonetti (himself a DJ), this imprint of TMU exemplifies one of the major strengths of the genre when it first existed: a creative melting pot of different genres and personalities. It's not strange, then, that TMU is best known not for dance or pop music, but rather for its experimental rock releases. IDIB groups such as the Chromatics and Glass Candy had already achieved a reasonable following for similar material. Their IDIB works are not entirely removed from these beginnings, but are accentuated with flourishes that are unmistakably disco. It's appropriate that the initial existence of disco was typified by its experimentation and hybridization, notably existing within the underground.

Earlier this year, the label released a scattershot compilation of material from its roster, *After Dark*, anticipating the inevitable release of several of these tracks, of course, as 12" singles. The retro artwork of both the collection and the 12" sleeves self-consciously approximates the tone of the original period, but what can be said about this recontextualization of disco in the tracks themselves?

For all its disco influence, the intro of the opening cut, Glass Candy's « *Rolling Down the Hills (Spring Demo)* », is likely to first call to mind Daft Punk. Though this a rather post-modern observation, the song's breathy frailty also exists within and outside the genre, both alluding to further complications and juxtapositions that are to be found on this collection: the « *is (not is)* » of disco. Certainly, the fade out at the end of the track is unsettling given the otherwise nostalgic atmosphere of the piece, emphasizing that these will not merely be uncomplicated retreats. The Chromatics' turn of Dark Day's « *Hands in the Dark* » confirms this approach, the vocals bridging the brittle coldness of the more abstract New York original with the similar, though only distantly implicit, tones of some Italo instrumentals. It's the group's « *In the City* », alongside the almost punishing « *Law of Life* », that ultimately best synthesize these two spheres, and stand as the highlights of the set.

Elsewhere there are more pure disco turns, with Glass Candy's cover of Belle Époque's « *Miss Broadway* » being a tighter structuralization of traditional genre tropes than the far rougher parent text. In addition

to a conservative take on Kraftwerk's « *Computer Love* » (an interesting contrast with Coldplay's somewhat recent single « *Talk* ») and Mirage's more active « *Last Nite a DJ Saved My Life* » remix, we are reminded of this compilation's function as a DJ set, where tenuously connected genres intermingle and colour one another in both their proximity and reconfiguration. All told, the translation of the multiple facets of disco are brilliantly orchestrated, though many of these tracks, beyond their individual pleasure, may only serve to conceptually frame the tensions within the aforementioned tracks. Ultimately, the entire package is as incredibly capable an approximation of the genre as it is a rich addition.

However, for all these recent efforts, it's vital to note that disco has steadily existed in the realm of popular music. During the recent upswing of the late 90s, Kylie Minogue is the most glaringly obvious example, and perhaps the slow-but-sure credibility she developed in the sub-mainstream was another source for this newfound acceptance. Yet, what we are seeing now may be best understood in the light of Whit Stillman's *The Last Days of Disco* (1998), a film I would call upon as a complete explanation should it have been made by his popular follower Noah Baumbach. In the film, a number of contrasting personalities – including characters who are young, fashionable and well-read – are drawn together for their shared interest in the genre and its environment, but the message of the film very clearly transcends mere societal context of the film's setting. One character, equal parts social misfit and yuppie, is given an emphatic and anachronistically self-aware speech to conclude the film, stating:

Disco will never be over. It will always live in our minds and hearts [...] Oh for a few years, maybe many years it will seem passé and ridiculous. It will be misrepresented, caricatured and sneered at, or worse, completely ignored. People will laugh about John Travolta, Olivia Newton John, white polyester suits and platform shoes [...] But we had nothing to do with that and still loved disco [...] It has got to come back someday. I just hope it will be in our own lifetimes

More and more this golden tinged sketch of disco eclipses the rockist perspective as the prevalent portrayal of the genre. This is due, in part, to efforts such as *After Dark*, which explicitly draw favourable comparisons, aided, no doubt, as they emanate from the context of what's currently hip.

CHRIS HERON



Like, OMG!!! A new BSB CD!!!

WHEN the Backstreet Boys released *Millennium* in 1999, people (mostly teenage girls, one assumes) lined up days in advance to get their copy. *Millennium* broke records by selling 1.13 million albums in its first week on shelves. *Rolling Stone* reported that the first-week sales would have been higher had CD stores not run out of copies. Critics compared the level of excitement surrounding the Backstreet Boys to the Beatlemania of the 1960s. The five young heartthrobs – Brian Littrell, Kevin Richardson, AJ McLean, Howie Dorough, and Nick Carter – sold out tickets to 53 concert dates in less than a day.

Being the dedicated journalist I am, I have been researching for this article since 1997. In November 1999, this Backstreet Boysologist attended the Toronto show of the band's *Into the Millennium* tour to examine the effects of boy band hysteria in young women. In my first-hand study of the condition, I witnessed girls screaming, crying, fainting, and even vomiting from excitement. (I wish I was kidding about that last one. I'm not.) When the Boys emerged on their flying boogie-boards in their ultra-tight, testicle-squeezing space suits, the crowd was deafening.

At the zenith of their popularity, the Backstreet Boys had no trouble drawing 50,000 hardcore fans to the SkyDome. Playing packed mega-stadiums every night was simply part of their job description. There was no doubt, circa 2000, that the Backstreet Boys were on top of the music scene. But, being on top, there was nowhere to go but down. And down the Backstreet Boys certainly went. "NSync, the Backstreet Boys' prancing, effeminate arch-nemeses, shattered *Millennium*'s sales record with their release of *No Strings Attached* in April 2000. The Backstreet Boys' next album, *Black and Blue*, sold well but failed to live up to "NSync's accomplishments. Then other events reared their carefully coiffed heads. The increasingly corpulent Nick and his younger but equally untalented brother Aaron sued their thieving parents. Worse was yet to come. Fans were stunned when Kevin and Brian announced that they were getting married. Non-fans were stunned that it wasn't each other. AJ, meanwhile, drove his car through a house while hopped-up on goof-balls. With Brian and Kevin going down the altar and AJ going down for drug possession and drunk driving, it seemed like the beginning of the end for the Back-

street Boys. By the summer of 2002, the *New York Times* declared that the spell of Backstreet-mania had been broken.

Flash-forward to 2007. The Backstreet Boys' creator and former manager, the grossly obese, child-molesting Lou Pearlman, is serving jail-time for fraud (the fraud involved an investment scheme in Indonesia, not the claim that boy bands were genuine artists). Nick has spent the last five years stuffing his face, getting Punk'd, punching Paris Hilton, and exposing his white-trash family in the unwatchable reality TV show, *House of Carters*. He also released a critically-panned, commercially disastrous solo CD, fittingly entitled *Now or Never*, as he attempted to capitalize on any residual Backstreet Boy fame. Brian and Kevin sired ridiculously-named offspring. AJ stayed sober. Howie kept it real. Their 2005 « comeback » CD, *Never Gone*, was so low-profile it might well have been titled *Never Released*. Now, the Boys are back in town with a new CD, *Unbreakable*. This time, there will be no vomiting. There might not even be crying. Do they still have fans? I decided to investigate.

My first stop: backstreet.net, a website for Backstreet Boys fans to discuss recent news about the band. To my surprise, there are still some fanatics out there – maybe not enough to fill the SkyDome, but enough to fill internet forums with raving, creepy nonsense. Responding to a post about Howie's engagement, one fan writes: « howie girlfriend is not cute at all. he could done better. his fincee is a troll. bri-an and kevin girls are cuter then howie girl. eeeeeewurururu ». [sic, of course, applies to the whole quotation.] She then goes on to leave her phone number, home address, place of work, and a plea for Howie to get in touch with her. Another inconsolable (and illiterate) fan begs Howie to « think about people you don't know and they love you to death i dream about you every night i love you i adore you ».

The few remaining fanatics who dominate backstreet.net are abuzz with talk of the Boys' new CD, *Unbreakable*, which plopped into stores on October 30. It features only four of the group's original five members: Kevin, the bushy-eyebrowed father figure of the group, deferred his role to the balding Brian and AJ. The consensus among the backstreet.net community can be best summarized by BSBgirl091's exultation, « yall's new album is SOOO awesome!!!!!!! ». With all due respect to BSBgirl091's

reasoned analysis, I'm afraid my own appraisal of the CD is somewhat less enthusiastic.

Let's start by looking at the outside of the album. The photoshopped photos make Nick appear far sexier than he really is, and they do a good job of hiding Brian's receding hairline. Howie also looks remarkably handsomer without his greasy ponytail and goofy grin. I start to feel optimistic about this CD. Will I be able to say such positive things about the music? Well, things start off promisingly with a bric-a, capella piece. These rich harmonies are what the Backstreet Boys do best. Just as I'm starting to enjoy it, though, the first song has to come on and crush my high hopes. « *Everything But Mine* » is, for lack of a better word, hilarious. It has an electro-pop flavour to it, with a dance beat and lots of synthesizer. It's very 80s, but not necessarily in the fun, nostalgic sense of the word. The next song is their first single, « *Incomparable* ». It's listenable, which is more than I can say for the previous track. It's a power ballad of the classic Backstreet Boys style, with heartfelt verses that build up to a cathartic chorus. *Unbreakable* contains several songs which are musically and thematically similar to « *Incomparable* », which is the best one of the bunch.

Aside from their traditional love songs, the Backstreet Boys throw some dance-pop into the mix, perhaps trying to cash in on the club scene like their (more successful) rival, Justin Timberlake. « *Treat Me Right* », co-written by former "NSync warbler JC Chasez, doesn't treat me right at all – it sounds like a bad videogame soundtrack, and is the corniest song on the CD. This isn't to say that the Backstreet Boys have lost their touch for an upbeat pop track. « *Panic* » is a surprisingly good dance song – though co-written by the Backstreet Boys, it strays from their usual sound (recall « *Backstreet's Back* » or « *Larger Than Life* »). « *One in a Million* » is heavier than one would expect from the Backstreet Boys, but certainly catchy. It's interesting to see a bit of experimentation from a group that made its money off of formulaic pop songs.

I'm not going to lie. I wanted to hate this CD, and leave my teenybopper days behind me for good. But I think I just might listen to it again. Here's my rave review: it's not bad. ■

CHRISTINE CREIGHTON



Death of a Culture

JOSIE WORNOFF



THE word 'death' is not pronounced in New York, in Paris, in London, because it burns the lips... *The Mexican, in contrast, is familiar with death, jokes about it, caresses it, sleeps with it, celebrates it; it is one of his favorite toys and his most steadfast love.*
- Octavio Paz

Is trick or treat the only option for a gratifying Halloween? The recent passing of this holiday has reinforced what most likely is associated with the tradition: clever costumes and sweet treats, pumpkin picking and scary movies... As children there was nothing better than this night of free candy and disguises, but after realizing our place in the world, a greater question emerges: why pretend to be something you're not when instead you could be figuring out exactly who you really are?

Mexico, along with most of Latin America, trade Halloween to instead celebrate the Day of the Dead (*Día de los Muertos*) annually on November 2nd. This unique tradition ignores the death taboo and instead celebrates the lives of their deceased loved ones with joy and reverence. Families design elaborate shrines devoted to missed members of their life with pictures of them, their favorite foods, liquor, and other personal items. The spirits of these deceased are then believed to return on that one day to be with their family once more, guided by the incense and candles that adorn their shrines. Colorful candy skulls are the replacement for our packaged junk food, and skeletons (*calaveras*) of all kinds are everywhere, yet lacking the fright factor that it excites in our society. This reaction to death is so different from ours that we must consider the complicated history that made it

so. Mexico's past has been uneasy ever since its conception. The Spanish Conquest enforced a European lifestyle upon an indigenous land which has never been fully reconciled. The new *mestizo* race has been constantly confronted with historical cataclysms inasmuch that their national identity has always been underrated and overlooked. This perpetual tragedy has created a sort of national callos against fear. Incredibly, the most common ground from Chihuahua to Chiapas, Baja California to Veracruz, is the constant presence of Death. For Mexicans, this ironically is a source of power, freedom and life. Accepting this special relationship with Death, they are able to laugh at it, and so exact a subtle sort of revenge on their hard lives.

With such a history of thwarted dreams and dashed hopes, it is amazing that Mexican society has been able to exchange this for such a positive outlook. Mexicans value their families over everything, even through death. Day of the Dead honors forever the memory and love of these deceased, keeping them interactive in their lives through annual inclusion via their shrine. As opposed to a North American funeral, this memorial is instead a lively celebration with loving memories and humorous anecdotes. The Mexican fall harvest season also naturally allows a grand feast with a slightly unusual guest of honor: the dead. Death is seen simply as a part of the natural life cycle, not something to fear.

Injustice is rarely without artistic angst, and accordingly this society of death is no exception. National tension is expressed not only through war and violence but also a beautiful

catharsis of art. José Guadalupe Posada is famous for his representations of *calaveras* in every ridiculous atmosphere; most famous is *La Catrina*, the skeleton bourgeois lady. The *calavera* symbol introduces for Mexico a new spirit and aesthetic language in which there is hope for the future. Diego Rivera even included one in his famous Mexico City mural *Dream of a Sunday Afternoon in Alameda Park*. Death as an accomplice in artistic endeavors satisfies a certain poetic justice for the nation.

This defiance of death has also accordingly produced many influential Mexican revolutionaries. Despite the number of political assassinations, there has been an impressive amount of rebellion. Most prominently, the Zapatista Army of National Liberation expresses their revolt through words rather than violence. Spokesperson Subcomandante Marcos' poetic voice urges the world against corporate globalization for the preservation of Mexican Indigenous heritage. The fearless ideology of the EZLN is inspired by the Revolution's leader Emiliano Zapata, who once shouted: *"It's better to die on your feet than to live on your knees!"* Interestingly enough, Mexicans maintain a popular legend that he lives, despite his very public assassination. The EZLN's slogan, *"Zapata lives; the struggle continues"*, brandishes the importance of his spirit, his essence, that the belief in something can overcome anything. The thousands of shrines dedicated to Zapata on the Day of the Dead emphasize this dedication of spirit and faith that Mexicans admirably maintain for their future.

Though death is fairly censored in our society, it obviously does not need to be so. Like Latin America's Day of the Dead, many other cultures

and communities share the strong acknowledgment of death and celebrate the life which it is a part of. In Romania, it is common custom to bury your loved ones not under a somber tombstone, but a large, colorful painted wooden grave marker, complete with a playful verse containing a best loved memory of the individual. The community can then delight in the positive aspect of death with this eternal memory. In addition, the French word for ghost is *revenant*, literally meaning *"to return"*, indicating a resilience to fear, and recognition of the deceased's continual presence.

In our culture, death is most prominent in horror films, or other such cultish mediums as glorified in the Toronto-based horror magazine *Rue Morgue*. However, this past November 2nd saw a Day of the Dead festival honoring the Mexican tradition nearby at Harbourfront Centre. It was an excellent way to spread knowledge about the ideology, to envision an authentic celebration, and garner respect for the idea of death that will hopefully work to loosen the taboo it currently holds on us in society.

So, next year when a princess, pirate or skeleton come trick-or-treating at my door, I'm not going to refuse them candy or quote Zapata at them. Nor will I tell the little *calavera* that he makes a fine mascot for the people of Mexico. But I will remember the holiday two days later celebrating the identity of the Mexican people. The holiday that emphasizes not consumerism but courage, not disguise but defiance, and most of all not greed for a night of candy, but rather an insatiable appetite for the remembrance of our heritage, and from this a fearless gaze towards the future. ☞



The Mixtape Director: Classifying Quentin Tarantino

ALONG

with

Stanley Kubrick, Quentin Tarantino was the very first filmmaker whom I perceived to be an auteur. It began with the teaser trailer for *Kill Bill*, which announced the film as « The 4th Film by Quentin Tarantino ». At that point back in 2003, I hadn't yet seen any of Tarantino's films, though I was vaguely aware of *Reservoir Dogs* and *Pulp Fiction* through their reputations and the numerous references to them in other movies and TV shows (like the « *Itchy and Scratchy* » episode in « *The Simpsons* » that was « *Guest Directed by Quentin Tarantino* »). The energetic *Kill Bill* teaser had made me curious both about the movie (which, with the trailer's scattershot display of crazy action sequences and sense of downright cool, promised to be quite unlike anything I had ever seen) and its director (I had seen film directors' names listed in trailers before, but never had they appeared so prominently, nor had they announced the count of the films they had made thus far like Tarantino did). Shortly after seeing the teaser, I went about the business of becoming acquainted with Tarantino's first two films (the under-rated *Jackie Brown* would come later). A Tarantino fan was born.

Sure enough, seeing *Kill Bill: Vol. 1* was an unforgettable movie-going experience. The first scene, with its close-up of Uma Thurman's bruised, bloody face shimmering in black-and-white, was a scary, unexpected jolt to start with, and from there, the film's delivery never faltered. The entire thing was a cinematic joyride, an illicit viewing experience that felt dangerous and illegal to behold (which makes sense, as *Kill Bill: Vol. 1* was the first and only movie I ever snuck into, its R rating conflicting with both my age and desire to see it). It was an adrenaline-laced crash course in the fun, excitement and pure energy that movies were capable of, and it left me wanting more.

This was when I was still in high school, a point in life where Tarantino fandom can be at its most blindingly intense. Throughout my high school years, I would watch Tarantino's movies repeatedly, memorize their dialogue, listen to their soundtracks and, by and large, hail the man as a cinematic genius. Many years have passed since high school, and in those years, I have seen many, many other films by many other directors besides Quentin Tarantino. I no longer hail him as a « genius » (a problematic term that should only ever be used when truly deserved), though he is still gifted in a particular way. I am much more critical of him

now, and his faults have been the subject of many-a-rant between friends. There are many things that Tarantino does not do or should not be relied upon for providing in his films. There are many things that Tarantino is not. I, however, want to try to classify what Tarantino is, illustrating the intriguing function that he serves in contemporary cinema culture – whether it is really necessary or not.

To this date, three films from Tarantino's filmography best exemplify the unique place he has built for himself in film culture: *Pulp Fiction*, *Kill Bill* (in this essay, both *Kill Bill: Vol. 1* and *Vol. 2* will be referred to as the single film that they were originally intended to be) and *Death Proof*. Before going any further, it would help to refer to a certain philosophy that Tarantino holds concerning his films. According to him, there are two universes in which his films take place: the « movie universe », in which *Reservoir Dogs* and *Pulp Fiction* are set, and the « movie-movie universe », in which *Kill Bill* and *Death Proof* are set (Tarantino's third film, *Jackie Brown*, falls under none of these categories: as it was based on Elmore Leonard's novel *Rum Punch*, it takes place in the « Elmore Leonard Universe »). What these designations essentially mean is that the films from the latter universe supposedly exist in the former universe as regular exploitation movies, meaning that characters such as *Pulp Fiction*'s Jules Winnfield, for example, could potentially drop into a movie theatre to catch a matinee screening of *Death Proof*. Because of this somewhat nutty yet creative logic, *Kill Bill* and *Death Proof* have an added sheen of reflexivity to them – essentially, these works are more aware of themselves as movies; specifically, movies that primarily have the look, feel and aesthetics of the exploitation movies of the 1970s that Tarantino so highly adores. This ideology helps classify these two films as post-modern cultural documents of sorts that evoke multiple eras of film past through a pastiche of references and homages presented with a tone of playful nostalgia. This is most directly communicated by the openings of both films, which feature « *Our Feature Presentation* » title cards ripped straight from the '70s, complete with a grainy, tired look and scratchy '70s funk music (*Kill Bill* also sports a Shaw Brothers logo, and *Death Proof* a vintage animation clip that announces the film's « Restricted » rating). Although *Pulp Fiction* isn't as reflexive in its presentation, it qualifies as a similar cultural document simply because of the same way in which it piles references and nods to films,

genres, figures and moments from film history in a collage-like manner (the best example of this is the often-cited steadicam shot that immerses the audience into Jack Rabbit Slim's). This is one of the reasons why *Pulp Fiction* is so appealing: there are simply so many things to be culled and gleaned from it that it can be described as a cinematic magpie's nest that yields new findings upon every viewing. That is essentially what these three films do: they showcase Tarantino's talent as a thieving magpie with a taste for trash and an ear for dialogue.

Tarantino's notorious debut *Reservoir Dogs* doesn't quite fit in with this group because it is the most plot-dependent of his films. Though it contains its fair share of casual chatter, the majority of the dialogue focuses on the failed jewelry store robbery and its side effects (Mr. Orange's gunshot wound, Mr. Blonde's questionable sanity, the lack of trust between the remaining characters, etc.). The film is also spatially and temporally confining as well, mostly set in and around the derelict building that serves as the rendezvous point for the robbers within a brief period of time between Mr. White's escape and the final bloodbath. Because of the real-time treatment given to the scenes in the warehouse, there are prolonged periods of time in which the only sounds to be heard are the characters' tense discussions – hence there is no room for the jukebox music compositions that normally decorate Tarantino's films. Also, the cast of speaking characters is refined mainly to the all-male group of crooks, thus enclosing the viewers in the often claustrophobic world of the robbers and their situation. The result is a film that is remarkably minimalist in comparison to Tarantino's later works, thus making it the odd film out and most sober entry in his oeuvre.

As was previously mentioned, *Jackie Brown* is based on a novel by crime writer Elmore Leonard, which could have provided a stable framework for Tarantino to work from. Like *Reservoir Dogs*, it devotes more attention to the plot, which revolves around a stash of money that several characters devise to steal. *Jackie Brown* also takes time to develop its characters, allowing them to take the spotlight as fleshed-out individuals instead of walking embodiments of pop culture lore or egotistical cool. The overall effect is one where it seems that Tarantino has honestly lost himself in the story material, consequently bringing the twisting plotline and its human cargo to the forefront of both his mind and the viewers'.

With *Pulp Fiction*, *Kill Bill*

and *Death Proof*, the main attraction is the pure spectacle of the movies. These films are concerned with making the movie-going process as engaging and enjoyable as possible (on Tarantino's terms, of course), and this process of enjoyment is very closely intertwined with the various forms of pop culture that exist in society. Essentially, Tarantino builds comfort zones for hisroels within his films, wrapping his favorite movies and music around him like a warm blanket. Some viewers are just as entertained and immersed as he is, while others simply aren't. Besides the aforementioned deliberate film and television references, Tarantino's films naturally inhabit a vibrant pop art world filled with brands, signs, logos and advertisements. The impulse to include so many consumerist signs was so great that Tarantino couldn't help inventing a few of his own (Big Kahuna Burger, Red Apple cigarettes). The presence of these invented brands within Tarantino's films serves as a reminder to viewers that they are in a unique, pop-saturated, post-modern universe – one very distinctly of Tarantino's design. This dynamic is also present in Tarantino's use of music. His films always come complete with a plethora of pop, rock and even country selections culled from his record collection that simultaneously compliment the onscreen action and reinforce the pop collage essence on a musical level. *Death Proof* contains perhaps the most obvious examples of this pop art construction. Its first half features many close-ups of a constantly playing jukebox that in fact belongs to Tarantino, who also hand-wrote (and, one would assume, hand-picked) its song list. The film features an endless barrage of movie posters, billboards, radio show excerpts, movie magazines and product displays (most of which brought together in an eye-poppingly colorful convenience store). Finally, there is the actual presence of the film industry in various forms. At one point, Kurt Russell's stuntman Mike lists the obscure films and TV shows on which he's worked in a scene where he could easily be seen as a stand-in for Tarantino, desperately clinging to forgotten relics of pop culture lore that fell out of vogue long ago. There is also the second group of female protagonists, all of whom work in the film industry in some capacity (overall, they consist of two stuntwomen, including real-life stuntwoman Zoë Bell playing herself, a makeup artist and a minor actress). Interestingly, this is the first time the film industry is referenced directly in a Tarantino film (not including his so-so segment



in *Four Rooms*, in which he played an egotistical, box-office figure-quoting celebrity, as he had always exclusively favored the couch potato's point of view—flickering TV sets are an all-too-common sight in his films.

Tarantino's tendency to play and experiment with cinematic techniques within his films warrants a comparison between him and another director who has exercised similar practices throughout his career: Jean-Luc Godard. Both Godard and Tarantino share an obsession with the cinema that they explore with every film they make. Tarantino's obsession is more the affectionate kind, one laced with a fan-boy's frantic, hyperactive adoration. Tarantino throws himself at the feet of all the Sam Peckinpahs, Monte Hellmans, and Seijun Suzukis that came before him. Godard's obsession is more of the scientific variety. In his films, he doesn't celebrate cinema so much as analyze it, prying apart its mechanisms with cold detachment and often harsh relentlessness. Eventually, he'd mix complex political science into his films, and by 1968, he was off the rails completely, making slews of almost incomprehensible film experiments that delved into such topics as politics, communication and the media. A study of his early career, however, indicates the same sort of playful cinephile spirit that Tarantino would later wield. *Breathless* is still Godard's most accessible film simply because he isn't as persistent in his line of inquiry. There is a casual attitude to it that translates into a hip-ness embodied by its jazzy soundtrack and charismatic young stars Jean-Paul Belmondo and Jean Seberg. *Breathless* too leads, with his fedora and her short haircut and New York Herald-Tribune t-shirt, are strikingly iconic, and this quality is, for once, never spoiled by Godard's stratagems. When the narrative comes to a halt in Seberg's apartment in typical Godardian fashion, it escapes the dragging over-intellectualization that similar scenes would exude in later films mainly through the playful banter between Belmondo and Seberg—it is as if the camera is happy to simply watch them, and the audience is too. *Breathless* is the Godard film that feels most like a Tarantino film because it is kindest to its audience. Most of Godard's other films, jarring though they may be, share with Tarantino's films the tendency to riff on film genres in interesting, unconventional ways. *A Woman is a Woman* is Godard's experimental homage to classic Hollywood musicals and, as fits the genre, marks his vibrant debut in color photography. *Alphaville* draws heavily from pulp science fiction and film noir. *Band of Outsiders*, which Tarantino famously named his production company after, shows Godard

continuing the tweaking of the crime genre he started in *Breathless* (for the record, these are my two favorite Godard films). *Pierrot le fou* is adventure literature run amok; *Robinson Crusoe* hijacked by Belmondo, Anna Karina and Godard. *Contempt*, heralded as Godard's big venture into commercial cinema, sure enough features big names such as producer Carlo Ponti and Brigitte Bardot, Jack Palance and legendary director Fritz Lang in acting roles, yet this is no run-of-the-mill movie (it never is with Godard), but instead a feature-length exploration of both a marriage in trouble and the legacy of cinema that came before them and of which they are a part. These icons are used very much in the same way that Tarantino would use legendary figures like Pam Grier, David Carradine and Kurt Russell—strategically, and with their respective cinematic legacies very much in mind, so that they would be reflected in the roles Tarantino would devise for them.

Another reoccurring motif in Godard's films is the telling of jokes and anecdotes. *Breathless* contains several of them (thanks to Belmondo's talkative Michel Poiccard), yet similar monologues can also be found in *A Woman is a Woman* (about a woman mixing up letters to her two lovers) and *Alphaville* (an especially amusing joke about a man who refuses to pay for his daily coffee). Tarantino's films share this motif, but with greater abundance—he is, of course, infamous for his skill with dialogue, and significant portions of his films consist of characters doing nothing more than telling stories, jokes and recollections with great relish and furious profanity (not to mention the acute accuracy with which he perfectly captures the essence of real-life chatter).

However, there is something seriously lacking in Godard's style that Tarantino delivers in full: fun. Godard's work can be seen as an intellectual duty that he appoints himself; Tarantino, on the other hand, is too busy having the time of his life. And the strange thing is, he is having so much fun that we can't help but get caught up in it with him. His enthusiasm towards movies can be extremely infectious—moreso even than with other cinephile directors such as Martin Scorsese and Peter Bogdanovich. While watching *Death Proof*, one can't help but get just as excited as the characters when they discover a white 1971 Dodge Challenger identical to the one in *Vanishing Point*—even if one's never heard of that movie before then. Tarantino is a highly contagious celebrationist while Godard's films are intellectual vaccines that too often need to be forced down with a teaspoon of sugar.

While the comparison be-

tween Tarantino and Godard may seem rough in some areas (especially considering the latter's higher degree of experimentation from the late 1960s onwards), a much closer and accurate one can be made between two key films: *Pulp Fiction* is just as deserving of being called a ground-breaker in cinema as *Breathless*. With his film, one could say that Tarantino adhered to Godard's now-famous personal philosophies about filmmaking (such as « Every film should have a beginning, a middle and an end, but not necessarily in that order » and « All you need to make a movie is a girl and a gun ») while remodeling them to match both his own personal tastes and the multimedia-savvy audiences of the 1990s. The result of all these considerations is the establishment of a filmmaker persona whose films are so engaging and (often over-)stimulating that people can't help comparing him to Godard. In the opening credits for *Band of Outsiders*, Godard playfully labels himself as « Jean-Luc Cinema Godard ». Rightfully so—no other film director (save François Truffaut) would be able to pull off such a move deservingly—save Tarantino.

The key unifying feature that *Pulp Fiction*, *Kill Bill* and *Death Proof* share is how they act as definitive versions of certain genres and art forms. Tarantino evokes other films and works quite straight-forwardly as a way of paying tribute to and placing himself within the genre that came before each of his own films. For example, there is more to *Pulp Fiction* than a series of references presented in Tarantino's engaging manner. Its true nature is presented up-front in its title—it provides the very definition of pulp fiction in one movie. A clue to this self-proclaimed artifice is the cinematography. Most of the film has a golden hue to it, and often exudes a bleached, over-exposed look that evokes the musty pages of a dog-eared dime store novel. This gives the entire film a trashy essence to it, regardless of its content. In this respect, it is interesting to consider scenes as seemingly profound as Samuel L. Jackson's Jules' final speech to Tim Roth's Pumpkin—it is a scene with intense emotion and importance to it, but presented in a shoddy style. The effect is similar to reading a quotation from classic literature printed on a crinkled candy bar wrapper. Contributing to this aesthetic are the chapter headings of each segment (that could just as easily be story titles in a fiction magazine) and the lurid and outrageous nature of its scenarios (which *The Gold Watch* best exemplifies).

Kill Bill and *Death Proof* are easier to classify in this respect because of the more obvious nature of their movie-ness. These films are more rigidly placed in the tradition

of specific film genres, exemplifying their best qualities in the process. Though *Kill Bill* possesses a wildly scattershot diversity in the selection of genres it borrows from, it can essentially be boiled down to THE definitive revenge movie, leaning heavily on the samurai film, kung-fu film and spaghetti western as its main influences. *Death Proof* can just as easily qualify as THE definitive car chase movie, tapping the essence of such existentialist road pictures as *Vanishing Point*, *Two-Lane Blacktop*, *Easy Rider* and *Dirty Mary Crazy Larry*, with liberal doses of the chickploitation and slasher movie genres thrown into the mix. Even *Reservoir Dogs* can be seen in this respect as THE definitive heist film, channeling such suspenseful classics as *The Taking of Pelham One Two Three* (which lends not only the concept of color-coded criminals, but also a claustrophobic setting where most of the film takes place, psychopathic and treacherous criminal characters and a mystery undercover cop). The special quality about these films is how Tarantino emulates these genres and traditions while simultaneously topping everything that each one previously had to offer. In many cases, he will rip a scene or shot composition straight from a previous film—for example, the snow-covered set piece that opens the Japanese revenge film *Lady Snowblood* and is recreated for the final duel in *Kill Bill: Vol. 1*—and, using today's filmmaking technology, inject new life and vitality into it. For more elaborate scenes, Tarantino pulls off cinematic feats that simply top all previous standards. The House of Blue Leaves sequence in *Kill Bill* is unlike any other fight scene that has come before it and has very possibly set a new standard in action cinema for years to come. Additionally, the epic car chase in *Death Proof* just might be considered greater than the classic ones in *Bullitt*, *The French Connection* and, yes, *Vanishing Point*. Plus, there is the icing on the cake: Tarantino refused to use CGI gimmickry for these sequences, honorably opting instead to play by the rules and do as those before him did, stunt players, harnesses and all. It is these sequences more than anything else that affirms their status as true labors of love, saluting both film history and the artists who populate that history.

With all of this said, one last question remains: is Tarantino alone in possessing this mixtape sensibility? The answer is both yes and no. Yes, because there are indeed other directors with a similar homage-based style, and no, because none of them do it with quite the same style as Tarantino. There are certainly other « definitive » films that have recently emerged as summations of other film



genres; these primarily include *Down with Love* (for the Rock Hudson/Doris Day sex comedy), *Sky Captain and the World of Tomorrow* (for Flash Gordon-style sci-fi serials), and *Far From Heaven* (for Douglas Sirk's tasteful 1950s melodramas). A key filmmaker who warrants comparison to Tarantino is none other than his frequent partner-in-crime: Robert Rodriguez. Rodriguez possesses the same child-like glee with all things movies, yet his films bear a closer resemblance to cartoons than to the intricately constructed homages that Tarantino constructs. It's not that Rodriguez isn't a good director; he's merely too obvious a writer. His storytelling style is far more deliberate and pronounced than in Tarantino's films, where the story is fed to the audience via the characters; their dialogue and behavioral quirks are so captivating that the plot points fly by as steadily as pavement stripes on a highway. Rodriguez's plot points are more like speed bumps. This is probably why the Tarantino-penned *From Dusk Till Dawn* is one of Rodriguez's better films. That movie's Gecko Brothers (played by Tarantino himself and George Clooney) are far more memorable for their unique ticks than Rodriguez's iconic yet flat Mariachi character is for all the rounds he shoots in his entire trilogy (*El Mariachi*, *Desperado*, *Once Upon A Time In Mexico*). Rodriguez came closest to achieving this sort of magic with Mexico's Agent Santos (played to perfection by Johnny Depp), yet his brand of cinema is more heavily dependent on things that go BOOM than anything else—well-drawn characters included.

Traveling in the complete opposite direction on the same road is Paul Thomas Anderson. In his 1997 masterpiece *Boogie Nights*, Anderson pays loving tribute to the cheesy porn films of the '70s and the more horrendous ones from the '80s that he plundered from his father's stash at the age of ten. Films like *The Jade Pussycat* (which Anderson has cited as the Hitchcock film of porn) and the John Holmes documentary *Exhausted* are almost exactly copied shot-for-shot.

Anderson also borrows elements from Robert Downey Sr.'s *Putney Swope* (in Don Cheadle's Buck Swope and a lot of randomly tossed firecrackers), *Raging Bull* (the rags-to-riches-to-rags story trajectory and both films' matching final shots) and the Soviet-Cuban co-production *I Am Cuba* (in the remarkable long take sequence that ends in a swimming pool). Reinforcing the film's Tarantino vibe is its excellent soundtrack, bringing the '70s and '80s alive with songs as diverse as « *Best of My Love* », « *Brand New Key* », « *Jeze's Girl* » and « *God Only Knows* ». Just as *Kill Bill* is Tarantino's love letter to kung fu, samurai and spaghetti western movies, *Boogie Nights* is Anderson's to John Holmes and Martin Scorsese. However, there is more to it than a Tarantino-esque collage, and it is very much a freestanding work that is driven by more than Anderson's love of old films. While Anderson's spirit of self-indulgence is undeniably present, he is also fleshing out his films with very real characters that the audience actually cares about emotionally. Proof of this lies in how Anderson uses Burt Reynolds. Had Tarantino made *Boogie Nights*, the entire film would most likely have a dated '70s feel to it, with Burt Reynolds inhabiting a role patched together from various projects that made him famous during this era. Anderson avoids this (as he explains on the DVD's highly entertaining director's commentary), instead making adult filmmaker Jack Horner a more complex, three-dimensional character whom Reynolds brings to life with genuine emotion and depth. One can see this in the scene in which Jack enthusiastically divulges his greatest ambition as a film director to Mark Wahlberg's Eddie Adams, or the one in which he jumps out of a limo to tackle a college kid who insults his career. Anderson writes all of the characters that make up the film's family of misfits with the same amount of sensitivity and devotion, which is why *Boogie Nights* works so well with its large ensemble of actors. Anderson continually reminds us that there are real people beneath the glitzy sheen of

1970s Los Angeles.

This is not to say that Tarantino is completely incapable of providing human characters; they just aren't always at the top of his agenda. The film in which he gives this area the most attention is *Jackie Brown*. True, its characters are just as chatty as usual for Tarantino, and it still contains a trove of homages (mainly from the blaxploitation genre). Yet these characters (mainly Pam Grier's Jackie Brown and Robert Forster's Max Cherry) have their share of genuinely emotional moments that are all too vacant from *Pulp Fiction*. This is what makes Samuel L. Jackson so much scarier as Ordell Robbie in one scene than Jules Winnfield in the entirety of *Pulp Fiction* (though this menace definitely shines through in the famous « *Does He Look like a Bitch?* » scene). One of the most telling aspects of this film is how Pam Grier, the quintessential blaxploitation icon, never once fires a gun or engages in the same kind of ass-kicking antics that made her legendary in films like *Coffy* and *Foxy Brown*. Instead, she is a tired air stewardess who often exudes fatigue and is most worried about losing the only job she can find for herself. As Tarantino's most recent works have confirmed, Jackie Brown truly is a human rarity among the gallery of more superficial characters that populate his films. While he went from *Jackie Brown* to his tribute films after a lengthy break, Anderson has developed a style of his own and continued to make films that explore human emotion using extremely well-written and complex characters. One could say that he is the Truffaut to Tarantino's Godard—even though there is some of Truffaut in Tarantino as well, particularly the cinematic playfulness that Truffaut exhibited throughout his career. One could easily compare the moment in *Shoot the Piano Player* when, after a crook swears the truth on his mother's life, it cuts to the mother dropping dead to the similar scene in *Kill Bill* when, after the Bride's name is finally revealed, the film cuts to a classroom full of children where the character

responds to the teacher taking attendance. These moments of whimsy are merely more side effects of Tarantino's cinephile nature. His films may often evoke Godard's early work, but he also shares the same euphoric fixation with the cinema that Truffaut possessed. As Godard's career progressed, he constantly tried to grasp complex truths that were beyond his reach; Truffaut and Tarantino never needed anything else besides the movies.

In closing, the best way to describe the niche Tarantino has carved for himself in contemporary film culture is one meant to fit a fanatical film historian of sorts who shares with his viewers his favorite cinematic obsessions by channeling them with renewed potency in his films, inadvertently providing a sort of commentary on film culture in the process. Probably the strongest case for this mentality is the recent *Grindhouse* experiment deployed by himself and Rodriguez where both of their films (*Planet Terror* and *Death Proof*) were released on one ticket with fake trailers and ads placed before and in-between. I saw this as a sort of cultural experiment in the movie-going process; a way for Tarantino and Rodriguez to resurrect, for a short time, the experience of seeing a sleazy double bill from the '70s. Some people didn't get into the spirit of it, as they either didn't bother with this strange concept or left during the credits of the first film(!)—their loss, I say. I saw it with some friends of mine, and we all loved it—it perfectly encapsulated the kind of cinematic exhilaration that punctuates Tarantino's best work. Afterwards, one of my friends joked that there should have been lobby cards in the theatre, simply so he could swipe some. His unsuspecting allusion to scenes from both Truffaut's *The 400 Blows* and *Day for Night* aimed at movie lovers everywhere was no mere coincidence—merely an indication of the kind of audience that Tarantino primarily makes his movies for: filmmakers who know the pure, shameless joy that can be obtained from a good night at the movies. ■

MARC SAINT-CYR

